

# ‘Justice for all’ threatened by inaction in Olympia

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**More than 70 percent of low-income households are hit with one or more civil legal problems, and many don’t know they qualify for free legal help.**

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

*The Seattle Times*

IN the upcoming legislative session — that will rightly focus on fully funding basic education — less visible core services are at risk of getting lost in the ether.

The we-can-only-manage-one-problem-at-a-time approach won’t fly when it comes to programs that preserve justice and fair play. This is particularly true in meeting the civil legal needs of all Washingtonians, irrespective of income.

Legislators have recognized the justice-funding gap for more than a decade. Since the 2009 recession, it’s gotten worse.

The [2015 Civil Legal Needs Study Update](#), a project chaired by state Supreme Court Justice Charles Wiggins, throws the problem into relief. The report highlights the unmet civil legal needs of poor families throughout Washington.

The sobering take-aways reflect a legal system that seems engineered to fail anyone living paycheck to paycheck. When primary family needs loom, legal concerns fall away, and then get worse.

Every year, more than 70 percent of low-income households are hit with one or more civil legal problems. Of those, three-fourths don’t receive any legal assistance despite qualifying for services.

Washington also falls short for its inadequate staffing necessary to meet minimum access to legal aid, a benchmark determined by Congress in 1978. The minimum ratio is one legal-aid attorney for every 5,000 eligible clients. Washington has one attorney for every 11,000.

The most common civil questions arise from housing issues, followed by domestic and family problems, health care, consumer and financial services, employment, and municipal and utility services.

**Equal justice is a core state responsibility. No excuses.”**

This year’s report, prepared by Washington State University’s Social and Economic Science Research Center, notes that victims of domestic violence and sexual assault register the highest number of civil legal problems per capita than any other group.

Washington’s legal community has tried to meet the challenge. The state Office of Civil Legal Aid is helped by the state-funded volunteer lawyer program, which annually assists more than 15,000 citizens. In addition to Justice Wiggins, former U.S. Attorney John McKay, who served as president of the nonprofit Legal Services Corporation, is a champion. As McKay warns, “We’re witnessing the erosion of the proud American principle of justice for all.”

Sustainable funding is the bottom line. Washington needs nearly 125 new attorneys and \$15.5 million a year to achieve minimum access to legal-aid services. Now, legal-aid offices in Walla Walla and other rural areas are rightfully worried about budget cuts.

If lawmakers kvetch about tapping the general fund — despite the compelling justice needs — they will need to latch on to something creative and reliable such as a legal-services fee or license hike. Equal justice is a core state responsibility. No excuses.

*Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).*